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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 000110

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

AF/S FOR BRIAN WALCH

NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR MICHELLE GAVIN

STATE PASS TO USAID FOR L. DOBBINS AND J. HARMON

ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU

ADDIS ABABA FOR ACSS

LABOR FOR SUDHA HALEY

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SUBJECT: STRIKE IN ZIMBABWE HITS EDUCATION HARDEST

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Some government employees, including teachers, began a labor action on February 5 in demand of higher wages, improved working conditions, and price cuts at government-controlled essential utilities. The greatest impact of the strike has been felt in the education sector, as teacher absenteeism has resulted in school closures in both urban and rural areas. Hospitals remain open and are functioning normally, while some government offices, including courts in Harare, are closed. END SUMMARY.

The Strike's Impact on Education, Healthcare, and Government Offices

¶2. (SBU) Government workers initiated a strike on February 5 with about 2,000 demonstrators gathering peacefully in Harare's Unity Square. Police observed but did not disrupt the event. University of Zimbabwe Professor John Makumbe, who has advised the World Bank on efforts to audit the civil service, estimates that the non-security sector civil service comprises 180,000 employees, of which two thirds are teachers; these figures contain "ghost workers" who receive salaries but do not hold positions. Makumbe believes that teachers have accounted for the vast majority of striking government workers; the strike has resulted in the closure of two thirds of all public schools. (NOTE: An Embassy employee who visited the town of Marondera in Mashonaland East on February 9 confirmed that all six of the town's schools were closed, and school closures within Harare are widespread. END NOTE.)

¶13. (SBU) A joint statement produced by the Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA), the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), and the Public Service Association (PSA), urged the inclusive government to convene an urgent meeting with APEX, the primary negotiating body for civil servants, in an effort to end the strike. The statement followed a series of negotiations that broke down on February 2 after civil service unions rejected a US\$16 per month wage increase. The two sides appear miles apart, as the Herald reported that the unions were demanding approximately US\$500 on February 5. That figure was a reduction from a previous request of about US\$600. PTUZ Secretary General Raymond Majongwe told us his union would accept US\$300 per month. Currently, the lowest paid civil servants earn US\$150 per month.

¶14. (SBU) ZIMTA's CEO, Sifiso Ndlovu, told us on February 9 that at least 50 percent of the union's 44,000 members were currently on strike, and he estimated in the urban areas of Harare, Bulawayo, Bindura, and Chinhoyi, that the number exceeded 70 percent. PTUZ reported that their 16,000 members were also striking and estimated 90 percent participation. (COMMENT: While participation is high, both these estimates are likely exaggerated figures. Anecdotal reports indicate that many teachers that receive substantial salary supplements from parents are not participating. These teachers are predominantly located in more affluent urban neighborhoods. END COMMENT.) PTUZ Programs Communications and Information Officer Oswald Madziwa said that his organization joined the strike knowing

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full well it would not result in meaningful pay raises because the GOZ does not have the resources. Rather, their motivation was to highlight key issues and press for action over the failure to raise funds from the Chiadzwa diamond fields and the high rates charged by electric, phone, and water utilities. He said his organization believed ZANU-PF was fanning the flames of the strike, via its control of the state media, to further its arguments that sanctions have undermined the economy.

¶15. (SBU) While some press reports are claiming that junior medical staff are on strike, Zimbabwe Medical Association (ZIMA) Secretary General Dr. Tapuwanashe Bwakura told us that the Harare public hospitals (Parirenyatwa, Harare, and Chitungwiza General), were fully functioning. We also spoke to Dr. Mbongeni Ndlovu, a Consultant Physician and Head of Medicine at Bulawayo's Mpilo Hospitals, who said that the two main hospitals in Bulawayo (Mpilo and United Bulawayo) were also running normally. Ndlovu believed that the prevailing sentiment in Bulawayo was that the strike would not lead to increased salaries as people understood that the GOZ did not have the funds to grant meaningful pay raises. One nurse with whom we spoke at Harare Hospital said that the nurses were not striking, nor had their union requested them to do so.

¶16. (SBU) Some government offices were closed on February 10, including the Central Registry in the Ministry of Home Affairs, the public service ministry, the education ministry, as well as local administrative offices in Bulawayo and Gweru. The Supreme Court, High Court, and the Harare Magistrates Court were also closed. The court closures have delayed numerous politically sensitive hearings including the High Court trial of MDC-T Treasurer Roy Bennett and a bail hearing of three MDC councilors in Banket who were arrested two weeks ago on charges of killing a ZANU-PF councilor. (NOTE: Certain classes of government workers, including the police, are categorized as "essential services" under Zimbabwe's labor laws, which makes it substantially harder for them to engage in labor actions. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) At this point, the strike's impact has largely been limited to the education sector. Educational workers are particularly vulnerable as they have not received additional salary support from donor groups. Some healthcare workers, including certain classes of doctors and nurses, have benefitted from donor sponsored "top-up" payments, which appear to have lessened their need to participate. It is likely that ZANU-PF will try to spin the strike as evidence of the inability of the MDC, which heads the finance and education ministries, to deliver. END COMMENT.

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